Premier attacks PM's green policies; Despite speech, federal Liberals downplayed idea Smith will lean harder to right on climate

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Body

The federal Liberal government says the re-election of a Danielle Smith-led United Conservative government in Alberta will not hinder Ottawa's efforts to advance aggressive climate action policies.

The morning after Smith's victory speech took clear shots at Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's environmental policies as a threat to Alberta's economy, Trudeau slipped into a cabinet meeting via a back door after attending a national prayer breakfast, leaving key cabinet ministers to react to the overnight news of her victory.

In her speech, Smith reprised campaign attacks on Ottawa's climate policy restrictions on electricity generation from natural gas and an emissions cap on the oil and gas industry.

"As premier, I cannot under any circumstances allow these contemplated federal policies to be inflicted upon Albertans. I simply can't, and I won't," she said.

Speaking to reporters, Natural Resources Minister Jonathan Wilkinson downplayed the idea the Smith government would lean harder to the right on climate action.

"Albertans are no different than other Canadians: they believe in climate change and the importance of addressing it, but they want to do it in a smart way," he said. "Let's not forget that climate change is a science issue, not a political issue. It's important for us to make progress on a pathway to net-zero (greenhouse gas emissions) by 2050.

"That's not partisan, that's simply science, and so we need to ensure that we are achieving the targets that we've set out for 2030. We're focused on doing that, but we want to do that in a way that's going to recognize economic realities and ensure that we're building a strong economy for the future."

Wilkinson pointed to amendments to the offshore oil royalty-sharing regimes with Newfoundland and Labrador and Nova Scotia that he introduced in the House of Commons on Tuesday. He said it is "a good example of collaboration with provinces on the eastern coast of Canada about how we enable offshore wind and hydrogen in a way that's going to build economic opportunity for the future.

"I look forward to talking to Premier Smith about critical minerals and hydrogen and a whole range of opportunities," he said.

The federal government is working on ways to expedite clean energy and electricity project approvals "in a manner that's consistent with environmental protection and appropriately discharging our obligations to Indigenous communities," Wilkinson said.

"We need to find ways to do things better more efficiently, but we are not looking at cutting corners from an environmental perspective on the electrical grid."

Smith's United Conservative Party won 49 seats in the Alberta legislature with 52.6 per cent of the popular vote, beating the NDP, which took 38 seats and 44 per cent of the popular vote.

Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland had little comment other than to state the obvious. "The people of Alberta voted, and we recognize that," she said.

Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault also expressed confidence that Ottawa will be able to work with Smith, despite her opposition to many aspects of Ottawa's climate change policies.

Under an NDP government in 2016, Alberta "committed to eliminate coal-produced electricity by 2030," Guilbeault insisted. He said that policy was continued under the two United Conservative premiers who followed - Jason Kenney and to date under Smith.

"They've continued under a Conservative government and so I'm confident that we will be able to work our differences out with them and as we've done on other issues, like (carbon) pricing," Guilbeault said.

Later, Trudeau briefly congratulated Smith, adding he expected to speak with her Tuesday afternoon.

"We'll continue to work on growing the economy, fighting climate change and on supporting Albertans into the future," he said.

NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh, whose demand that Ottawa end all fossil fuel subsidies stands in sharp contrast to his provincial counterpart, Rachel Notley, who supported Ottawa's purchase of an oil pipeline, said Smith's loss of a significant number of seats to Notley's NDP represented a "seismic" shift in Alberta politics.

In French, Singh said Notley has changed the political discourse in Alberta, and has led the NDP to grow as a political force.

"This was not just an accident. They won more seats this time, the Conservatives lost seats, so she has shown a great deal of strength," he said.

Other potential flashpoints could arise, as Smith has revived previous demands to replace the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in Alberta - where the Mounties are contracted to serve as a provincial police force - with a provincial police agency, such as the Ontario Provincial Police or the Sûreté du Québec, and to withdraw from the Canada Pension Plan.

Green Party parliamentary leader Elizabeth May said Smith's government "represents a bigger challenge for the Liberals as federal government," and exhibits a deep urban-rural divide that is a growing challenge for all parties.

But she also suggested it is "quite possible" Smith will attempt to work more collaboratively, given she lost so many seats, and could decide "to be more of a compassionate conservative.

"I mean, she nearly lost the election based on extremism," May said. "She only pulled it back to get a government and be able to be premier by doing everything she could to telegraph that she was really reasonable."

Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre posted a tweet early Tuesday morning congratulating Smith and her party on a "resounding victory."

"Last night Albertans rejected the woke NDP-Liberal coalition," Poilievre wrote.

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